

*What is the value of art?*



DIACOUSTICS







## INTRODUCTION

This volume is a collection of brief reflections arising out of a question that was already being asked of art and artists even at a time when those concepts did not yet exist: “*Why?*” — why spend time making or devoting attention to something purely for its own sake when it has no practical use?

The answer to this question is, of course, the art itself, and as such it lies beyond words — just as it lies beyond (or perhaps before) the realm of what we call the ‘rational’. Words merely hint at an answer by allowing us to better understand the question.

These fragments of writing have been placed in a specific order so that each grows organically out of the one that preceded it — however they may also be read individually, dipping in and out at leisure. Reading them in sequence or on their own may offer different perspectives for interpretation.

*D.C.  
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## PART I

### *Seed*



# I

What we can evoke through a rational analysis of “Art” is not the experience of art itself – all we are able to offer in its place is an idea, an abstraction of what art is. Conscious human thought is a machine for generating abstractions of the world: mathematical models, symbols, categories, identities, rules of thumb, images – which we use as a map to navigate it. And though a map of Rome may be of considerable use in getting you around its streets, on its own it can never tell you what it would *mean* to walk those streets, or what it would *feel* like to actually be there.

Some forms of knowledge can be communicated with relative ease from one human being to another through language, although what we can communicate is not the direct experience of things, but only description and analysis: shadows of the original. On the other hand the knowledge of direct experience is not only limited to the individual who is

experiencing it, but also to the time and place of the event itself. Even the person who has actually lived the experience will not be able to truly relive the original as they revisit it in memory. In remembering a happy memory I may find that I am actually feeling sadness or nostalgia, the thought of things that once angered me may make me laugh now, and even recalling something as vivid as an accident I do not again feel the physical pain I felt in that moment. We can never truly return to what we were.

## II

In art there is only the present tense; that moment we are all living in all the time – not the fading past to which memories so often call us, nor that fountain of hopes and anxieties we call the future, towards which our thoughts of what we must do or hope to do inevitably lead. In the experience of art the present is so... *present* that it is easy to forget our own place and time. We are no longer concerned with where we are, what happened earlier that day, our immediate plans for the future – we are immersed in a moment that simply *is*.

When you see a film your mind is not fixed on the fact that you are in a cinema, you are immersed in the experience and the cinema fades away – that is if the film is doing its job properly. When reading a good book you are not simply sitting in a chair staring at markings on paper; and if you close your eyes to focus solely on listening to music you are absorbed into

the present sensation of the moment until all the world around you dissolves into nothingness.

However, if you try to examine that experience in the moment, if you try to direct your attention towards your consciousness of the experience, to understand what it *feels* like – if you try to catch the moment and hold on to it – you are taking your attention away from the experience itself. You become self-aware, and suddenly you are no longer immersed *in the moment*.

C. S. Lewis reflected that our dilemma is “to taste and not to know, or to know and not to taste.”

### III

This problem has for many centuries been the main point of difference between mystics and academics, the mystics preferring the groundedness of personal experience and the truths of esoteric knowledge, the academics finding knowledge in abstraction, formalised systems, models, and the artefacts of human thought – with philosophers occupying a no man’s land in between, sometimes taking up more of the practices of one side, sometimes more of the other. Art is often a sublimation of this contradiction: through the use of symbols it creates its own worlds which touch us with the intensity of direct experience.

If I were to ask someone to show me what the world looks like, their most likely response would be to show me a globe, or, worse still, a flat map of the world on paper. It is funny that

this should be what we imagine when we think of the world pictures and maps – when the world is all around us all the time. Another answer to the same question might be to say “you’re looking at it!” and to point in every direction while saying “*this* is what the world looks like!” I would like to try to talk about art in this way.

#### IV

There is a common assumption that it is the privileged or the elite who are preoccupied with art, that the common working folk don’t have time for such things – they have real-world concerns to worry about. This can fundamentally be boiled down to a common sense philosophy of “survival first and art second.”

In fact this has been the stance adopted by many moral codes and philosophies throughout history that have tried to analyse in a rational way what the *point* of what we do is, and what we *should* spend our time doing. People have often found the answer to this question by fulfilling a given role within a community, by putting their life to the service of God or the service of humanity. These are the needs, aims, and desires around which both cults and cultures form (it is not always easy to tell the two apart), and they are often still the forces that drive modern political and social movements, personal and public philosophies, while we try to answer the question: well, now that I have this *thing*, this existence, what do I do with it . . . How do I go about employing my time?

## V

If I were to try to give a reason why we should bother to make art at all, all I could honestly say is that we do it because we want to. Sometimes we might be able to say that art is edifying, or that it teaches good moral values, but often it has little or nothing to do with such things. I don't see any reason to believe that listening to a given piece of piano music will make someone a morally better or worse person.

Another justification that the rationalist camp often seeks when investigating the worth of something is asking whether it makes the world a better place. Leaving aside the significant obstacle that people have always disagreed on what will make the world a better place, or what makes a person moral, as inevitably as they disagree about what their favourite music is what can we actually say about art making the world a better place? We can say that we like some pieces of art, though by no means all, and that they somehow improve the world through their presence, but if improving the world is our goal one might ask: when there are people in the world who have much more serious problems to deal with, is making art really the best way to spend one's time?

## VI

Almost two and a half millennia ago Plato's *Republic* saw in the arts a force that would corrupt men, stirring their more sentimental, baser emotions, that would distract them from

achieving the perfect state – and the conflict between Plato and Homer can still be found today in many utopian movements whose aim is to improve the world.

The Effective Altruists for example believe in applying a rigorously analytical and empirical approach not too dissimilar from the methods of science to the question of how they go about making the world a better place, and as might be expected they reach two very common sense positions: (1) we should first focus our energies on healthcare, food production, and the essentials that are materially fundamental to sustaining more and longer human lives, and (2) that dedicating one's life to art for its own sake is somewhat self-indulgent. In many ways this is not very different from the argument made by those who ask why we bother to spend money on space exploration while there are still evils taking place here on earth.

Yet it is precisely in many tribal communities, and among those who live in much less materially rich pre-industrial societies that the greatest importance is given to art, song, and ritual, and where objects of sublime beauty – which for them require great time and effort and resources to produce – are not made simply to be sold, but cherished and imbued with profoundly sacred, symbolic, and social significance. If it is true that art is simply a frilly addition to existence, a pleasant but optional extra, why is it that communities which we consider as being much poorer than ourselves often take it so much more seriously than we do?



It seems that it is in rich societies such as ours, where material goods have become so readily available, that people have stopped looking for answers in anything other than the acquisition of wealth and stuff, and art is valued so little.

## VII

This devaluing of art in the west seems to happen precisely because there is an irrational spark in us that values art so deeply. When that irrational spark tries to express the profundity of its admiration for art it turns it into a concept, it puts art *literally* on pedestals and makes it into something “special”. But as we do this we lose the ability to see art in a much simpler way: as a natural tendency of humans that humans make and enjoy art with the same simple inevitability that a tree bears fruit.

Instead we are always thinking of that art which is very consciously art and we make art while being very self-aware about the fact that we are *making art*. Having labelled as “Art” those things which we value for their deep and troubling beauty, over time we start to confuse the label with art itself: many of those of us who would wish to make something significant fool ourselves into thinking that we can do this simply by calling those things we make “*Art*”, or by working under the guise that we are *making art* forgetting what has always been the case: it is the *making* that made art so great in the first place, not the *labelling*. In the contemporary west

there is often more art in the work of a humble artisan or craftsman than in the work of those who would see themselves as “artists”.

## VIII

In fact so often conversations about art not only don't deal at all with art — that impulse that seeks beauty for beauty's sake — they don't even deal with art as a concept, they are simply about what we might call the art industry. We can all easily think of the exorbitant prices fetched by some works of art at auctions, at the way art is often used as a status symbol by the rich and famous, at the badly-executed art of those artists who labour under the pretence that what truly counts is only the concept (or subversion thereof) behind a work of art, not the actual, existing, physical artwork itself — an idea, incidentally, which can only be held by those to whom the materials they work with are fundamentally worthless. An individual who lives in a world where parchment is not only rare, but requires significant effort and time to produce will take great care in what they write and how they write it, but the same will likely not hold true for a person who lives in a world in which they can cheaply buy sheets of paper by the hundred and does not value those materials which are fundamental to their work.

## IX

We know that our primitive ancestors adorned their caves with paintings and incisions, they decorated their bodies with

jewellery, paints, tattoos and piercings, and we know that they produced music with the ancient flutes, bows, and rattles we have found. And these early humans were possibly the furthest thing that we can imagine from privilege or riches. They were people who were barely surviving, in the majority of cases dying very young of diseases, untreated wounds, painful infections, malnourishment, living in conditions that would be shocking to virtually anybody living today anywhere in the world. And not only did they create art, but they did so in the face of obstacles that would deter almost any contemporary artist. The amount of work that it would have taken to produce even small amounts of pigment for painting, or to carve a small bone flute is something that is utterly alien to us today. And yet in the face of such difficulty, in the face of danger and severe existential threat, these individuals who lived short, brutish, and often painful lives — people who you would imagine had much more pressing and serious concerns on their minds — spent their time and resources painstakingly creating pigment one microscopic bit at a time so as to cover entire rock faces with the most fascinating and powerful depictions — and, even more poignantly, with those life-affirming hand prints that say *I was here*.

## X

A purely rational analysis of why we do things cannot account for why humans make art, just as it cannot account for why our ancestors dragged massive quantities of rock for 150 miles to build Stonehenge when their time could have been more

efficiently employed in finding and developing better resources, shelters and so on. And yet the really significant question is: if they had repressed their desire to erect such monuments and focused all their attention on gaining more resources and improving their material wellbeing would that have made their society a better or happier one? The society we currently live in is the most efficient and the richest that has ever existed in terms of resources and material wealth, and yet I'm not sure I would describe it as a "happy" society "anxious" perhaps would seem a more appropriate word.

Every culture has had a place for dance, and has defined its identity through the stories it tells and the images it creates. Men and women have accompanied their hard labour with songs (although sadly this is quite a rare sight in the modern west), and given meaning to their life story through the use of ritual. And in fact even many of the canonic artists that we have labelled as such have often produced art while living in poverty, under the boot of oppression, or in the grips of deep psychological turmoil.

"Art" is simply the name we give to the most excellent examples of what happens when the sensibility of the human psyche is faced with the insensibility of the universe, it's the howl of *the beast that shouted "I" at the heart of the world.*





## PART II

### *Flower*





## XI

The 11th Century Islamic philosopher and mystic al-Ghazālī worried about the problem of Truth. He considered that if the senses can be mistaken, and that their assumptions can be corrected by the use of logic, then what if there is a higher form of knowledge that can correct the errors of logic? He found this higher knowledge in communing with the mind of God, which needed no justification beyond itself. We need not hold any particular religious belief ourselves to feel a great sympathy for his concerns — that at the core of human existence lies a certain dissatisfaction, a restlessness . . . unconsciously we are searching for answers that will give us some feeling of objectivity, something that grounds us and gives what we do meaning.

When we use the term “self-consciousness” part of what we are trying to describe is the awareness of our endless seeking, and as we become aware of it we worry about it, we call it

“anxiety” and proceed in turn to become anxious about being anxious. The presence of anxiety confirms what we suspected all along: there *is* something wrong with us — and so we resume our seeking even more restlessly, unable to be still. But while most of us try to run from this emptiness by keeping ourselves continually distracted, some individuals, here and there, haven’t always done so, and in those moments they found something answers could not give. From Nāgārjuna to Nietzsche there has been a recurring insight: that humans will often make so much noise because they yearn for silence — a silence of the mind.

## XII

We seem to very easily forget what some philosophers and artists try to show us — that we can find all that we need without definite answers — and when we don’t get answers, we invent them. Truth, Beauty, Reason, Purity, Piety, God, the Good — ideals are attempts at defining designated stopping points for our questions, a place where we believe we can find some sort of certainty. They are attempts at quieting our restless mind.

Each culture has contrived different ways of defining what is True, and Right, and Beautiful, and each laughs at what other cultures have considered true, right, and beautiful — especially those cultures that came before it — in an attempt to reassure us that we have finally found what is truly good, what is truly right, what is truly real — forgetting how every culture that

existed before thought the same, with the same conviction. The wise may find truth and beauty in all cultures, without needing to believe in *any* of the specific truths of each. But ultimately all humans inescapably fail to a greater or lesser extent both at understanding and at withholding belief: and as we hold any one idea to be true we necessarily close our thoughts off from understanding other ideas.

### XIII

In providing us with answers the culture we create is attempting to give meaning to our existence, rather than face up to its ultimate meaninglessness — but in the end the answers it gives are themselves meaningless.

“We might say the point of the individual is simply that he contributes to the welfare of the race, and the point of the race is that it reproduces itself, to reproduce itself, to reproduce itself, and keep going . . . now that isn’t really a point at all! It’s just fatuous.”

Here Alan Watts reminds us of how common it is to seek meaning in human endeavours not by considering individuals as ends in themselves, but rather as a *means* to an end, imagining humans as rational beings that will be perfectly fulfilled and content to work towards the singular and never-ending betterment of humankind — playing the part of rational, diligent cogs in a rational, diligent machine — until one day we inevitably go extinct. And not one of these cogs would ever

think to ask: *if my individual existence is so valueless that I am not free to simply do with it as I wish, what is the value of living at all?*

#### XIV

However, there is another way in which we describe things as being meaningful, as making sense, ways which seem closer to what we mean when we talk about the meaningfulness of existence — that it is worth something to exist, to ourselves at least. We say for example that music is meaningful, and by this we don't mean that it performs a specific function. We say that dance is meaningful, and certainly it is one of the greatest expressions of human joy when done for its own sake — but it certainly gets you nowhere.

In tracing the meandering lines of Bach's music, where at the end of a lengthy composition we may easily find ourselves back where the whole piece started, it would be hard to try to explain what the point of it all was. In listening to the ebb and flow of one of the great ragas as performed by Ali Akbar Khan we may find in it the same meaning we find in watching waves crashing on a beach — no meaning. What we find is not that imagined act of creation that so inflates the egos of artists, nor the imposition of something upon the world so as to achieve a desired effect, but rather a sublime reflection of that way in which the world is — shifting, flowing, in a never-ending dance. A meaningful meaninglessness.

We find the idea of the World itself as art, as dance, as music, and as play in many of the great mythologies and philosophies of human culture. The ebb and flow of a musical composition is at heart an alternation of moments of tension with moments of resolution. Similarly an author introduces elements of tension within a novel for no other reason than that without them there would be nothing to resolve within the story—in fact without them there would be no story at all! Art is the greatest form of play known to man, and by reflection many cultures around the world have imagined that God speaks, or thinks, or dreams the world into being as a great act of cosmic play.

The most interesting incarnation of such a mythology tells the story that God laughs, and God's laughter is the World. There are few things that give greater pleasure or meaning to our existence than to suddenly and unexpectedly find ourselves laughing uncontrollably—a life without laughter would likely not be a life worth living. And yet it is precisely in such moments that we lose all pretence of rationality—the sounds we produce become utterly meaningless babble. We are made speechless; unable to think, unable even to breathe properly. For a moment we forget ourselves, and all else that may have appeared as significant becomes nothing.

## XVI

When we say that art, dance, music, or even laughter are meaningful we are saying so not because they mean something other than themselves, but because they are so satisfying as they are. Because in that moment our insatiable yearning for meaning in our existence, our need to search for – or invent a *reason* for everything is quieted. For a moment, at least, we are satisfied.

And in this moment of quiet, when all the noise of those meaningless important things has died away, we may perhaps find some fulfilment in making something, or in contemplating something, not for any particular reason, but simply because we take delight in the making or the contemplating.

## XVII

Oscar Wilde believed that art, in its most exalted forms, is useless, and that it is so great precisely because it is useless. Similarly he reflected that all bad poetry is deeply sincere – it stems from obvious needs, and offers obvious solutions to obvious problems. However, if the obvious solutions were effective, the problems would have been solved long ago. And yet here we are: still searching.

It may appear to be useful to earn money, or acquire resources, or develop infrastructures and communities that allow for human existence, but only if that existence is in itself

satisfying. If existing isn't enjoyable, then why even bother? The rational cannot account for the irrational, and without it, it cannot even account for itself.

## XVIII

By focusing exclusively on that which is merely useful — the development and distribution of material wealth — one could imagine achieving a global utopia that is not too dissimilar from the 21st Century West: a world in which virtually everyone has a high standard of living, has access to better technology and to more information than even any emperor living in the past ever had, and yet it is also a world in which people are dissatisfied, anxious, constantly seeking some sort of confirmation, and in general not necessarily that happy living in. Perhaps all those useful things we did didn't give us what we were looking for.

If you *had* to love someone, not because you freely chose and desired to do so, but out of some sense of duty, or because you were told that this is what you should do, you would be unable to make yourself fall in love with them. And love is a very good metaphor for study, for dedicating one's life with care and attention to something, for all those things which we do that give our lives meaning. We retrace the lines over and over again with great care, not because we have some reason to do so, but because we could not do otherwise.

*That which is done out of love* Nietzsche writes *occurs beyond good and evil.*

## XIX

Late in his life Thomas Aquinas retreated into a form of silence. He claimed he had been the recipient of a revelation, and that all that he had written in his life was of the worth of straw when compared to the revelation. The body of works he had composed up to this point runs at well over 8 million words, and yet he did not go on to define the nature of this experience. After the revelation, he said, there were no more words. When he experienced that which he had spent his life discussing, like Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, he was left speechless.

When we are asking what the value of art is, fundamentally what we are doing is once again asking what it can do *for* us in a very narrow sense. Art cannot do anything for you, in fact it does not care about you in the slightest and has nothing whatsoever to offer other than what it *is*. It will not make you richer, or give you nice things, or provide solutions to your problems. However, what you may find in it is that many of those aspects of your existence that appeared to you as problems may be little more than illusions. What you may find is not the salvation promised by the dream of mass production and material wealth for all (a promise made in turn by marketers, politicians, and scientists), but a form of silence – a place where, for a moment, the mind stops.







## FURTHER MATERIALS:

The following are sources referenced directly or indirectly in the text and/or in which I was immersed at the time of writing.

- Myth Became Fact* C. S. Lewis  
*The Republic* Plato  
*Neon Genesis Evangelion* Hideaki Anno  
*The Silence of Animals* John N. Gray  
*The Incoherence of the Philosophers* al-Ghazālī  
*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* Nāgārjuna  
*The Coincidence of Opposites* Alan Watts  
*Mass in B minor* Johann Sebastian Bach  
*Bilaskhani Todi* Ali Akbar Khan  
*Mīyan Ki Todi* Kishori Amonkar  
*The Power of Art* A. L. Kennedy  
*The Critic as Artist* Oscar Wilde  
*The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* Brian Davies  
*Beyond Good and Evil* Friedrich Nietzsche  
*Métaux* Iannis Xenakis  
*Brave New World* Aldous Huxley  
*Calvin & Hobbes* Bill Watterson  
*Laughter in Ancient Rome* Mary Beard  
*The World as Will and Representation* Arthur Schopenhauer  
*Inventions for Radio* Delia Derbyshire, Barry Bermange  
*World Musics in Context* Peter Fletcher  
*Xenakis, prophet of insensibility* Milan Kundera  
*Sous le regard d'un soleil noir* Francis Dhomont  
*The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus

The seated figures that appear on the cover and in the pages of this volume can be found in caves around the Tassili N'Ajjer formations in the central plateaus of the Sahara desert, the depictions left on these rocks are dated between 8,000 to just under 2,000 years ago. The hand stencil artwork is from the *Cueva de las Manos* in Argentina, the art in this cave dates from 13,000 to 9,000 years ago.



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